

CROSSROADS

Interstate Turns 50

An investment in safety, mobility and prosperity



Fun Facts

Original Name:

*National System of
Interstate and Defense
Highways*

Concrete Used:

*Enough to circle the equator
with a wall nine feet thick
and 50 feet high*

Longest North-South

*Interstate Route:
I-95 stretches 1,919.74 miles
from Miami, FL, to Houlton, ME*

**A SYMBOL
OF FREEDOM**



1956 - 2006

Interstate Turns 50

In the summer of 1956, a young engineering aide for the Maine State Highway Commission spent two hours on a survey crew re-establishing a missing benchmark along a new highway between Brunswick and Falmouth. That was Chief Engineer John Dority's first exposure to a new federal initiative called the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. Today we just call it "the Interstate."



As inauspicious as that two-hour survey sounds today, it was part of the beginning of the biggest highway initiative in Maine, and the nation's, history. It forever changed the way Mainers and Americans thought about transportation. Bangor Daily News writer Brian Swartz explained it this way in a 1990 article:

"Not that long ago, a trip to Portland from Bangor demanded at least a full day, if not an overnight stay. Today, a family can leave Bangor in the morning, shop and dine in Portland through the mid-afternoon and return to Bangor in time for the evening news. When dignitaries cut the last ribbon on I-95, road travel in Maine was never the same again."



5/01/1959 Construction of the I-95
Messalonskee Stream bridge in Waterville

Development of the Interstate had similar effects on the rest of the nation. Today, drivers can go 1,900 miles from the Canadian border at Houlton, ME to Miami, FL without encountering a traffic light or at-grade intersection. And to think it all began just 50 years ago this year...

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the law establishing America's superhighway system in 1956, it provided for 41,000 miles

of Interstate highways. It also established the Federal Highway Trust Fund as a means for generating the federal share of the costs for future federal-aid roads.

Two totally new transportation concepts emerged in 1956:

1. a multi-lane, limited-access, divided highway built to uniform design standards; and
2. a funding system based on the concept that those who used the roads should pay for them through a dedicated fuel tax.

These were new ideas for America and Maine. "Maine got one-half of one-percent of the Interstate Trust Fund as our share," Dority remembers. "Our charge from the State Highway Commission was to take that money and do as many miles of Interstate as you can."

Maine's original Interstate design provided for:

- a four-lane, controlled-access, divided highway from Augusta to the Route 16 interchange north of Old Town; and
- a two-lane, controlled-access highway with four-lane divided highways at interchanges from there to Houlton.

"It took all the money we had. You laid out the miles you could do for the money you had," Dority continues.

The first two sections of Maine Interstate funded for construction according to MaineDOT historical documents were "from Brunswick village south through Freeport to the Desert of Maine Road, and the Main Street interchange near the City Hospital in Bangor."

The Brunswick-Freeport section first opened to traffic in 1957 and the Bangor Industrial Spur, later to become part of today's I-395, opened from Main Street to the Odlin Road in 1959.



Construction of I-95 in Brunswick

What had its beginnings as those two short sections of highway blossomed over the next five decades into a 367-mile-long system.

Construction of I-95, as we know it today, wasn't simply a matter of starting at one end and building to the other. Funding, property acquisition, and unique construction issues all played a part.

In York County, to ease the way for construction and funding of a new Interstate bridge connecting



Piscataqua River Bridge Construction - Kittery

Maine and New Hampshire, State Highway Commission Chairman David H. Stevens convinced the Maine Turnpike to sell its southernmost section to the state, in return for which the state would build the Turnpike a new toll plaza in York. That exchange paved the way for construction of the new Piscataqua River Bridge, which, at the time of its design, was touted as having "the widest roadway in the United States for the Interstate system using the largest bridge bearings ever cast by Bethlehem Steel." It took over a decade from concept to completion.

David H. Stevens also noted, "I don't think the present DOT could put a highway through Portland today the way we did it then because of the environmental reasons." Dority takes a slightly more cautious approach, noting that in today's world, "building through Deering Oaks and around Portland Stadium, as well as relocating a quarter-mile of Long Creek would be permit-challenging at best."

In routing the roadway through the Kenduskeag Stream area of Bangor, engineers determined the best alignment was through an existing cemetery. Dority remembers seeing some of the workers hired by the contractors to dig up and relocate the graves where the new alignment would go. "They were paid big bucks, but were kept in quarantine for the duration of the job" as a safety measure, he recalls.

Thirty years after it began, Maine's original Interstate highway system was complete. The portion from Augusta to Houlton alone accounted for 197 contracts and over two decades of construction.



Augusta Interchange

In addition to the hundreds of Maine State Highway Commission and Maine Department of Transportation engineers who worked on this major undertaking, were the hundreds of private-sector workers employed by contractors like Cianchette Brothers, W. H. Hinman, Frank Rossi and Sons, The Bridge Construction Corporation, Callahan Brothers, H. E. Sargent, Reed & Reed, and Thomas DiCenzo.

As the 1991 AASHTO study "The States and the Interstates" notes, "Its completion marks the single most extensive civilian public works project in U.S. history. It has helped to transform the landscape and the economy and has contributed to important shifts in the distribution of population."

INTERSTATE SYSTEM TURNS 50 - MAINE'S INTERSTATE ODDITIES:

-- The original section of I-295 from Gardiner to Falmouth was the target of a U.S. Department of Transportation research study to evaluate ways to reduce the number of deer killed on rural Interstate highways. Reflective "deer mirrors" were mounted on trees along the side of the highway right-of-way. The intent was that the mirrors would reflect the headlights of oncoming cars into the woods, "freezing" the deer in place until after the vehicle had passed by. John Dority says the end result was that the study produced "no data to prove it worked."

-- The widest section of Interstate in Maine is in Topsham, where it's 800 feet between the center lines of the northbound and southbound lanes. It was built that way to take advantage of the natural topography.

-- Two sections of Maine's Interstate have received national recognition for the way they blend with the landscape. The section from Augusta to Waterville was named "America's Most Scenic Highway" by Parade Magazine in 1961. Bangor-to-Newport received an "Honorable Mention" in the same competition in 1965.

-- Aroostook County potato farmers, angry over what they saw as unfair Canadian competition, dumped truckloads of potatoes on the Interstate at the Houlton border crossing in the late 1970's, shutting down that international commerce link for over a day.